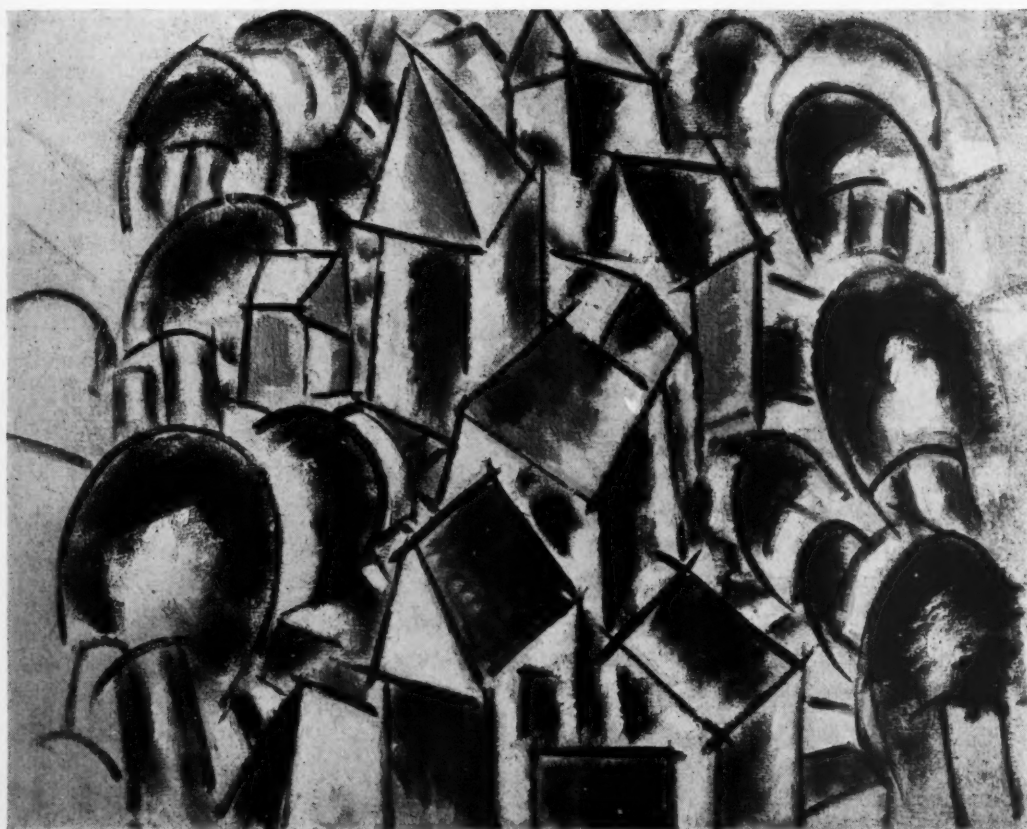


OCT 8 1935

MFA

The Bulletin of The Museum of Modern Art



1. Fernand Léger, *The Village in the Forest*. Oil, 1914. From a private collection, New York.

Fernand Léger Exhibition

1 Volume 3 October 1935

Fernand Léger Versus Cubism

The current exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art should considerably enhance the American appreciation of contemporary painting. It has never been easy in this country to approach the work of Fernand Léger, as the large displays occasionally offered us have been dealer presentations which emphasized the hard, repellant, slickly-finished canvases of recent date, when the painter's theory had begun to triumph over talent. And, when an example of fine quality has occasionally been made available to the public through a museum or private collection, we have found it always in group-exhibitions, where, by its very nature, it becomes difficult to penetrate.

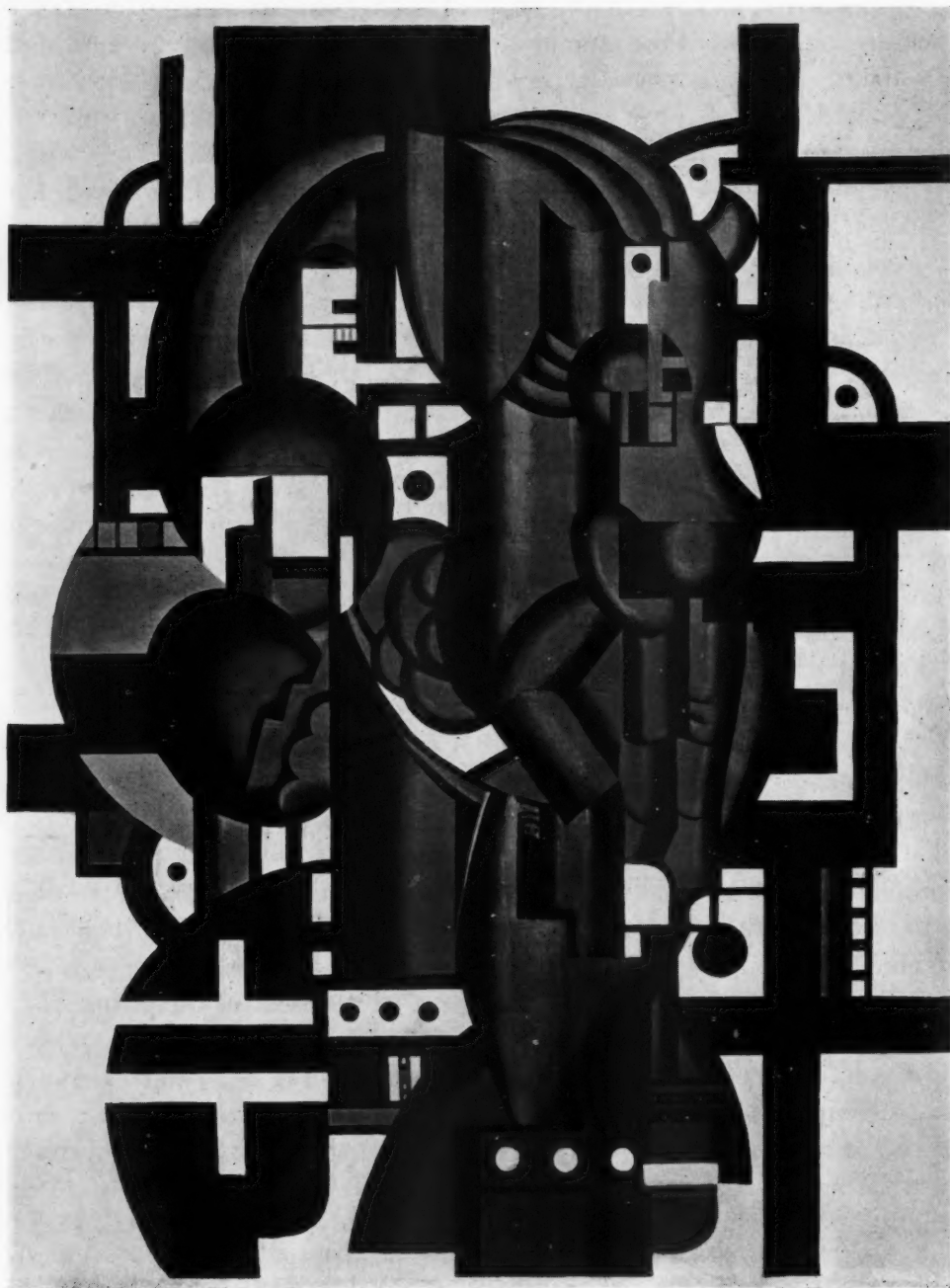
The very unfamiliarity with which a work of Léger will assert itself from other paintings of the Paris School provides a key to its comprehension; for Léger is, of all the contemporary painters, the one most truly modern. It is improbable that he will ever lead the current field of art, where there are few to contest the preëminence of Picasso; but decades must pass before it will become apparent from the vast Picasso production just what of it is Picasso and what is Negro, Peruvian, Byzantine, Ingres, and a hundred other sources of fertilization. There will be no such confusion with regard to Léger; for Léger has derived but little from either past civilizations or his contemporaries; he cannot even, like Corot and Braque, be snugly fitted into the French tradition. His aesthetic contributions always stand quite naked and apart, and when he does have intercourse with the past it is completely transparent, without being absorbed, in any eclectic sense, by his creative system.

Of the few contacts that Léger must concede, his relation to the Cubist group has been the one most erroneously expanded. Indeed, since critics need must peg each artist on to a specific branch or stem, he is often put forward as a Cubist painter,—sometimes as a leader in the movement. Actually, Léger was never a Cubist at all. The term "Cubism" has come to be used very loosely; its origin has been traced to a remark of Matisse in 1908, who applied the term to a certain landscape by Braque. The movement owes its source to Braque, its acceptance to Picasso, who joined him in their search for the "anonymous personality." Juan Gris was their friend, and others contributed to the movement; but Léger was never intimate with the group; he was, on the whole, in opposition both to the members and to their work, a stand he has ever since maintained. We will come later to the cardinal principle of Cubism which finally made its mark on Léger, years after the original Cubists had become immersed in other things.

The early Légers, contemporary with Cubism, such as *The Village in the*

Forest, 1914, (see cover) have, to be sure, some qualities in common with the Cubist pictures; there is the largeness of conception and elimination of picturesque detail, the unity that was new to western art, the deformation of perspective. This had not been brought through Cubism into Léger's work; they all had snatched it from a common source; it was an influence that had long been brewing, and at last fermented when Vlaminck brought African sculpture to the attention of the Fauves; many painters swallowed whole the emotional concentration of the savage races, and a violent expressionism bade fair to rebuild the Romantic upon the Impressionist ruins. Even Léger was impressed, but he remained emotionally unruffled; he was led to strip his canvases of non-essentials, to leave his mind free for the long analysis of the object, to retain a concentrated strength that was destined never to desert him. What Léger had achieved was the core of the primitive impulse,—the opposite pole from Gauguin, Dufresne, and others who depict the dark-skinned races as through illustration, decoratively and exotically. Léger gave one glance and then much contemplation; he had seen that the source of strength in the Negro objects was their emotional and sculptural concentration,—an exact *rapprochement* between form and expression; never after this does he take his eyes from the Twentieth Century City.

Touching upon this primitive influence that the Cubists had so recently explored, the Léger paintings of 1914-circa bear a superficial resemblance to Cubist work; in reality Léger still remained a long way from the Cubist doctrines, and the War was to intervene before he came in contact with the real essentials. It was ten years before this that the Cubists had grown up swiftly out of the last period of Cézanne; in his long and toilsome effort toward the analyzation of the object in its relation to pictorial structure, Cézanne had broken the object, not in impressionist surface lights and shadows, but into planes of weighted tone and color. There were times in the Renaissance when a painter would veer in this direction; Titian betrays a hint of it in his great last painting, but he died too early (at the age of 98); Rembrandt and El Greco betray leanings here as well, but complete realization was always crippled by the Baroque *chiaroscuro*. Cézanne did it completely, and brought it to the point where we can begin to analyze the Cubists. As a way of painting, Cubism was from the first misunderstood; it is popularly regarded as the dividing of an object into cubes. In reality it has very little to do with cubes; it has to do with *planes*,—not the color-planes of Cézanne, but planes that tilt according to the tonal transition. The Cubists proceeded to break the object more and more for added movement, sensing the violence with which the eye will swing into the rhythm fixed by the direction of breakage. Cézanne could only break his object through glances, (he



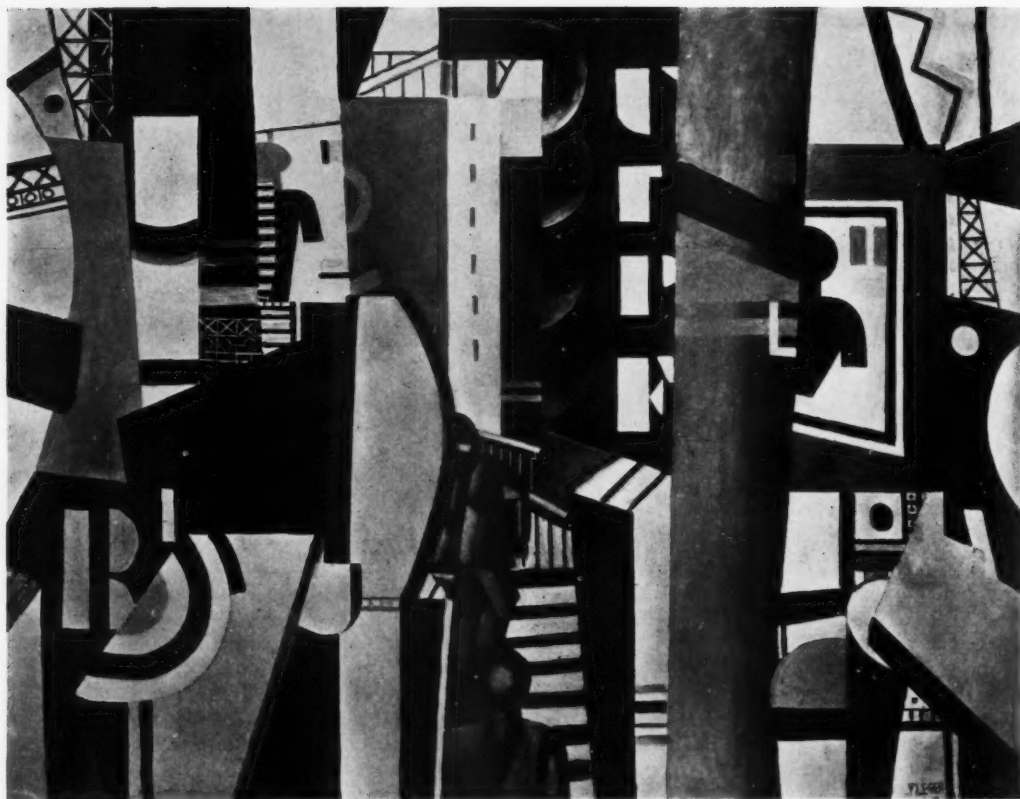
12. Fernand Léger. *Composition in Blue*. Oil, 1923-27. From the collection of The Gallery of Living Art, New York University.

himself has said that he could not paint without a model). Likewise the Cubists, though less eye-conscious than Cézanne, never completely turned their glance from Nature. Their paintings—although free from direct visual resemblance to that which they represent—have always a connection with reality, in fact are usually portraits or landscapes. And, most unexpectedly of all, the misty spectre of Impressionism glides throughout the Cubist pictures, shedding high-lights, cast-shadows, and blurred transitions in its path. The measured lift of shifting planes tilted in illimitable variation,—it is from this that the finest Cubist paintings derive their imperial complexity and repose.

There is nothing comparable to this spaciousness in Léger, who had thrown Impressionist tendencies overboard at the start, who had never put aside his cold though garish colors. His forms are always clear and sharp, and the conception of the object has remained as mental as a Coptic fresco. It is the object that removes him farthest from the Cubists, and it is the object for its own sake that has become the *grande passion* of Léger's artistic consciousness; he has reduced his art of late to an ever-tightening rendition of objects; he will recount how in this mechanical age a painting must stand comparison with the other things sold in the cities; he has sought to paint them all—pipes, disks, parts of the machines—with such freshness and precision that they can compete with the modern craftsman's products. Human beings and fragments of foliage intrude throughout the pictures, and from no love of Nature Léger paints them, but merely as other perfectly functioning mechanisms that he meets upon the streets.

The precise rendition of objects is not the end of Léger's work, it is merely his point of departure. The Twentieth Century, he has reasoned, owes its distinctive personality to the care and arrangement of its objects,—witness the contrast between the neatness of the Galerie Lafayette and the disarray of the Mediaeval market-place, or the littered corners of the Victorian antique shop. Léger has arranged his objects into a broad and sparkling arabesque; we can look in vain for its prototype in the past,—for something to hang it on, as we have hung Matisse on the Mogul miniatures, or Degas on to Hiroshige. The Léger arabesque was no more than a natural evolution, the vessel to fit his own desire for space-control. And the color-planes are contrasted sharply, they are broken and shaped for an ever-heightening rhythm, but it is not often that they move obliquely to and from the canvas with the three-dimensional interweaving of the Cubists; more often are they rounded into solid pipes and bars.

It is just and fitting that Léger's most important work should have been called *The City*, 1919, (No. 5). Léger is the first complete city-painter; he passes by the



5. Fernand Léger, *The City*. Oil, 1919. From the collection of the artist. Lent through the courtesy of The Renaissance Society of The University of Chicago.

local color and all that might make a city-painting picturesque; he does not illustrate the city at all, content to fix the fragments into an arabesque that should pound out rhythms to suggest the city's life. In the beautiful *Composition*, 1923-27 (No. 12) from the Gallery of Living Art, we will find a smoother perfection, a movement that is rather suave and subtle than staccato. There is no subject, yet the forms are not abstract; each shape is tactile, constructed to be grasped and handled, for Léger cannot leave his objects long enough to think abstractly.

It has been the strength of Léger that he has always stood apart and hewn his own deep narrow road; it might have been another's weakness, but with Léger it could not have been otherwise. Surely such an art can never fail of interest, even though the soil may sometimes run a trifle thin where the creative mind takes its root apart from other growth, where the past brings so little to the present fruition. And for us today a Léger Exhibition with its fresh and positive

address will compensate for loss in fullness and variety. The painter can point to everything before us here and say it is his own, and without too sharp an envy of the eclectic Cubists' greater richness. For he is the real primitive, the adventurer who draws upon his new horizon rather than on talk of art. Cézanne suggested that it was he who would be looked on as the primitive of that which he was attempting; but Cézanne, for all his clumsy monumentality, was no primitive. Perhaps in the end it will be Cézanne who will be seen with the final comment on the Renaissance. No one will ever make such claim for Léger; his art will always take its place,—an early comment on the machine-made city that has grown up about him.

GEORGE L. K. MORRIS

Exhibition Schedule 1935-1936

Ignatz Wiemeler, Modern Bookbinder
(Under the auspices of the Library Committee)

Fernand Léger, paintings and drawings

Contemporary architecture in California
Members' Preview, October 1st

The recent work of Le Corbusier
Members' Preview, October 24th

Vincent van Gogh Exhibition
Members' Preview, November 5th

American and European Painting
(From the collection of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., the first comprehensive exhibition of this recent gift to the Museum)

The Posters of Cassandre
Members' Preview, January 14th

Cubism and "Abstract" Art
Members' Preview, February 25th

Modern Painters and Sculptors as Illustrators
(Under the auspices of the Library Committee)
Members' Preview, April 21st

Publications 1935-1936

Ignatz Wiemeler, Modern Bookbinder
October 1935

Vincent van Gogh
November 1935

Cubism and "Abstract" Art
February 1936

Modern Painters and Sculptors as Illustrators
April 1936

Catalog: Fernand Léger Exhibition

(Lent through The Renaissance Society of The University of Chicago, unless otherwise designated.)

Oils

- *1. Village in the Forest, 1914
Private Collection, New York
2. Exit of the Ballets Russes, 1914
Collection Léonide Massine, Paris
3. Disks, 1918
4. The Scaffolding, 1919
Collection The Gallery of Living Art, New York University
- *5. The City, 1919
6. Breakfast, c. 1920
Private Collection, New York
7. The Aviator, 1920
Collection Mrs. Charles H. Russell, Jr.
8. The Mechanic, 1920
9. Luncheon, 1921
Collection Paul Rosenberg, Paris
10. Mechanical Element, 1925
Collection Mr. and Mrs. S. R. Guggenheim, New York
11. Woman and Flowers, 1926
- *12. Composition in Blue, 1923-27
Collection The Gallery of Living Art, New York University
13. Still Life, 1927
Collection Mrs. Charles H. Russell, Jr.
14. Composition No. 1, mural, 1927
15. Still Life, 1928
16. Composition in Yellow and Black, 1929
17. Composition with Vine, 1929
Collection Sidney Janis, New York
18. Green Foliage, 1930
Collection The Gallery of Living Art, New York University
19. Composition with Figures, 1931
Collection The Gallery of Living Art, New York University
20. Composition with Tree Trunk, 1933
Collection the Artist
21. Composition with Two Profiles, No. 1, 1933
22. Composition with One Profile, 1934-35
23. Composition with Aloe, No. 4, 1934-35
Collection the Artist
24. Composition with Aloe, 1935

*Illustrated.

Gouaches, Watercolors and Drawings

25. Nude Figure, 1911. Ink drawing
Collection The Gallery of Living Art, New York University
26. Study for "Woman in Red and Green," 1913. Wash drawing
Collection The Gallery of Living Art, New York University
27. Study for "Breakfast," 1920. Watercolor.
Private Collection, New York
28. Study for "Luncheon," 1924. Pencil drawing
Collection The Gallery of Living Art, New York University
29. Still Life, 1924. Gouache
Collection The Gallery of Living Art, New York University
30. Still Life, 1925. Watercolor
Collection The Gallery of Living Art, New York University
31. Study for mural, 1925. Watercolor.
Collection The Gallery of Living Art, New York University
32. Accordion, 1926. Gouache
Collection The Gallery of Living Art, New York University
33. Composition, 1927. Gouache
Collection Mrs. Charles H. Russell, Jr.
34. Composition, 1932. Gouache
35. Root of Apple Tree, 1932. Gouache
36. Composition, 1932. Watercolor
37. Root of Pear Tree, 1932. Gouache
Collection The Gallery of Living Art, New York University
38. Corkscrews, 1933. Ink drawing
39. Gruyère Cheese (left) and Composition (right), 1933. Ink drawings
40. Composition with Jacket, 1933. Ink drawing
41. Trousers, 1933. Ink drawing
42. Hands and Foot (left) and Composition (right), 1933. Ink drawing
Collection The Museum of Modern Art
43. Designs for magazine cover, 1934. Gouache
Collection The Gallery of Living Art, New York University

